



# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

*Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource — Employees*

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686  
Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. I secretly receive e-mails from an employee complaining about her coworker's performance. I can't judge their accuracy, but I can't ignore some of the complaints. Should I act on this information? How do I reduce the likelihood of conflict that will follow?

A. It is appropriate to bring the complaints to the attention of the employee so they can be discussed. However, you should meet with the employee sending the emails beforehand to inform her of your decision. Ask whether she wishes to continue to remain anonymous, but also consider whether this is practical or even possible. Since you have been provided with the information, it is yours to manage in a way you can best determine. Do not judge your employee until he has a chance to respond to the complaints. Expect your employee to receive the information, consider it, and act accordingly. It is likely that your employee will be upset to discover that a coworker made reports about him without his knowledge, but experience shows that most employees will not retaliate or harass the reporting coworker. If inappropriate behavior does follow, treat this as a separate problem for your attention.

■ Q. As a new supervisor, I began playing the tough guy and often threatened employees with their jobs in order to demonstrate control. I realize I was wrong to take this approach. Is there any hope that I can win back the trust that I lost with my style?

A. Employees and supervisors prefer harmony and avoiding the stress that your management style produced. This desire for a harmonious workplace provides the hope that you can turn things around. It is likely that you have important personal issues to address to ensure the fundamental changes you desire. EAS can assist you with these goals so you do not return to your former supervision style. You will need to fix one relationship at a time. If practical, meet in private with each employee to acknowledge your supervision style and the changes you have committed to make in order to improve morale. Although you will feel vulnerable with this approach, it is the one that will accelerate regaining the trust you desire. You will soon discover that most employees respect authority and respond favorably to a more supportive supervision style.

■ Q. Once a year, I invite the employees who I supervise on a day trip to the beach. Most employees attend. I think it helps our relationship and improves morale. Should I avoid such personal involvement with my employees?

A. Few companies beyond the military have policies prohibiting supervisors from socializing with employees they supervise, but many informally discourage it. Even if such a policy does not exist, there are good reasons to minimize socializing with your subordinates. The employment relationship will influence and potentially conflict with any other type of relationship you have with your employees. This fact does not change, even on a beach trip. You may believe that the beach trip improves morale, but what is the impact on those who don't go? Do they wonder if they are valued as much as those who participate? Do some employees go on the trip only to please the supervisor? Ask yourself if your personal needs or the need for high morale underlies the purpose of the trip. You may decide that the potential conflict of socializing with your employees is not worth the risk that it could negatively affect the morale and productivity you seek to preserve.

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■ Q. My employee was hired without the skills necessary for her position. Her performance is therefore unsatisfactory. I will be proposing her dismissal. Is there any point in referring her to EAS since no amount of EAS help will salvage her?

A. Assuming you are bringing the performance problems to your employee's attention, it is appropriate to recommend using EAS. Your employee has not resigned. This means your employee does not agree with your assessment, is not aware of your assessment, or is facing the crisis of sudden job loss or perhaps not having other job options. The personal distress of losing a job would by itself justify her use of EAS. When an employee experiences performance problems, do not hesitate to make supervisor referrals on the basis of whether the employee or the organization will benefit—just refer the employee. This way, you have acted responsibly in accordance with your agency policy and can be sure that you took every measure available if dismissal becomes necessary.

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■ Q. An employee's own therapist phoned to coach me on how I should supervise him to avoid negatively affecting his health condition. She thinks my personality style makes his problems worse. What should I do? Frankly, I don't want to talk to her.

A. You are not obligated to consult with your employee's therapist about your personality issues. Ask your employee to speak with his therapist or health care provider to determine what is needed that might assist him in being more productive. Ask him to give you this information in writing. Perhaps EAS can help your employee arrange such communication. If you receive a written request for changes that pertain directly to your personal style of supervision, you can then decide whether such changes are warranted or possible. It would be prudent to consult with your supervisor and Human Resource Consultant about this matter, because you are being accused of personally exacerbating your employee's health problem.

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**NOTES:**

Visit EAS on our website at:  
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